

Class Struggle

The Workers' Republic Women's Liberation International Socialism

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Group

Irish Section of the
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THE ABORTION REFERENDUM on 3rd December is an attempt to roll back the tiny concession made by the Supreme Court in February on abortion rights. Of the three amendments to the Constitution two are concerned with making sure the problem of 5,000 Irish abortions each year continues to be exported out of sight to Britain—5,000 women forced to travel secretly as 'criminals' with the minimum of information or counselling.

The other, the "12th Amendment" would outlaw the termination of a pregnancy even where a doctor thought that this would give a better chance of full recovery from a major illness. This would put women in a worse situation than before the X case.

In February, mass anger throughout the country forced the Government to retreat from the Attorney General's attempt to stop a raped 14-year old from travelling for an abortion. Reynolds organised for the case to be appealed to the Supreme Court which only lifted the injunction against the girl because of the public outrage. The judges were forced to rule that the risk of suicide took precedence over the spurious so-called 'right to life' of the fetus. Now Reynolds wants to reverse this decision to placate the Bishops and the anti-abortion lobby.

Fianna Fáil's 12th amendment would not allow any termination for the sake of the 'health' of the mother. Yet it is cynically presented to the public as guaranteeing the 'right to life' of the mother. In fact it strictly limits terminations to where the mother is in immediate danger of death.

Hospital Deaths

A doctor, writing in the *Irish Independent* on 22 Oct., spelt out what this means in a report of how two pregnant women died as a result of breast cancer because the hospitals refused to terminate their pregnancies when this might have helped them to survive.

Some doctors in Ireland would have gone ahead with the terminations in such cases even though the law was unclear. Under Fianna Fáil's proposal the law would be much clearer: it would explicitly outlaw terminating a pregnancy intended to improve the woman's chances of survival.

The woman can be treated with chemotherapy, radiation etc., they say, whatever the 'indirect' damage to the fetus, but it would be illegal to carry out the 'direct' termination in advance even if that gave her a better chance of survival.

Defeating this amendment could mean the difference between life and death for some women, but it would hardly begin to address the problems faced by the 5,000 women each year with crisis pregnancies who would still have to leave Ireland to have abortions. On their return they are forced to keep their decision secret, ostracised by the anti-abortion right-wing of the establishment as 'murderers'.

The Irish ruling class exports the problem of these women to Britain in

Vote No to the Anti-Abortion Amendment!



Participants in 10,000-strong demonstration called last February to protest against the decision to stop a 14-year old rape victim from travelling to Britain for an abortion.

the name of 'morality'. This is the price of keeping the Church on their side as a major ideological prop for a social order which condemns hundreds of thousands to the misery of unemployment. Measured against the conditions inflicted on tens of thousands of children denied a decent life, their 'concern' for the life of the 'unborn' is a fraud and a lie.

Vicious Amendment

Working class women and the whole labour and trade union movement, youth and students must be mobilised to defeat this vicious amendment.

We need to build a struggle which can force this bosses's state to make abortion available in Ireland, free, as part of the health services. Women made pregnant by rapists or incest must have a legally guaranteed right to a termination here in Ireland. If the fetus is diagnosed as not capable of

surviving, they must have the right to a termination rather than be forced to carry it for months with the certainty of its death.

Allowing for abortion in these special circumstances, however, will not begin to meet the needs of the 5,000 forced to travel each year. They choose abortion for compelling personal reasons over which there can be no right of veto by a state which systematically oppresses women.

Their needs can be accommodated in law by nothing less than the full recognition of the woman's right to choose abortion in whatever circumstances she decides necessary. We fight, therefore, for free and legal abortion on demand now!

Abortion is overwhelmingly a class issue. It is the ordinary working class woman, housewife, worker or unemployed, who suffers most from the hypocritical tyranny of this male-chauvinist and clericalist state. Crisis-pregnancies are all the more common

in Ireland precisely because this same state even denies women and men adequate sex education and contraception.

It leaves many women little option other than abortion because it inflicts on them, and on children, economic and social conditions in which many parents cannot hope to raise and care for children adequately. Any fight for abortion rights must be linked to the whole class struggle against the unemployment, low wages and wretched health, education and social services inflicted on so many hundreds of thousands.

Simplest Step

The simplest and most immediate step to undermine all these constitutional measures against abortion is to force the state to repeal the 8th Amendment altogether. The IWG alone has consistently fought for a campaign for this demand which is

now more directly relevant than ever.

While such a step would deny the state any mandate to "vindicate the rights of the unborn" at the expense of the mother, it would still threaten penal servitude for life to every woman having an abortion.

Full decriminalisation of abortion can only be won by also demanding repeal of the 1861 Act (Sections 58 & 59) now! This is the same Act as must now be amended to also decriminalise homosexuality.

We must mobilise the maximum vote on 3rd Dec. against the 12th Amendment which seeks to limit a woman's 'right to life'. While criticising the hypocrisy of the other two amendments on travel and information, we must nevertheless make sure they are carried in order to defend elementary democratic rights.

Demonstrate and rally for Women's Right to Health and Life, Sat. 28th November, at 2.30 pm from Parnell Square. ■

GENERAL ELECTION? Vote Labour & Democratic Left!

EDITORIAL

GENERAL ELECTION? Vote Labour and Democratic Left!

AS WE GO to print it seems likely that the Fianna Fáil/PLD Coalition will break up and a new election be called at the same time as the Referendum.

There is every danger that in the post election situation the two working class parties, Labour and Democratic Left will be prepared to negotiate on forming a new coalition with either of the major capitalist parties.

It must be a central point of agitation for all socialists to fight against any such outcome throughout the election period.

Wedded to the bosses

Neither of these parties is socialist. Despite being rooted in the working class, despite not having the support of the bosses, financially or otherwise, they are parties which are wedded to defence of the capitalist state. In any major crisis of political rule for the bosses, they will bail out Fine Gael or Fianna Fáil rather than mobilise a working class offensive—unless they are forced to independently oppose all forms of coalition or support for an openly capitalist government.

The political independence of the working class is fundamental to its ability to defend itself. To maintain it means mobilising the hundreds of thousands, who look to Labour and Democratic Left as some sort of alternative to the bosses' parties, to raise clear demands on Spring and De Rossa in every struggle. Make it impossible for them to use our votes in support of our open class enemies.

At this moment that means demanding of Labour and Democratic Left that they use the Dáil to advance our interests and that they openly call for mobilisations of industrial and street action on the key issues of the day.

- For the right to work. The state must be forced to create schemes of useful public employment under trade union conditions to create jobs for all, and to fight for the 35-hour week and ban on overtime, without loss of earnings, to create jobs.

- Nationalise the banks and finance houses and relieve workers and public services of the crippling increases in interest rates.

- Fight all cuts in social welfare, education, health and social services.

- Fight all privatisations in whole or part, of state companies.

- Break all collaborationist dealing between union leaders and the state by fighting together for wage claims to fully compensate for price rises and productivity.

- Repeal the 8th Amendment and the 1861 Act to decriminalise abortion and homosexuality. For free and legal abortion on demand!

- For an immediate referendum to repeal the ban on divorce, and for free and legal divorce at the request of one partner, with full social welfare support for dependants.

- Oppose every attempt to drop Article 2 of the Constitution which would abandon the claim of the Irish nation to the island of Ireland as a whole as a concession to reactionary Unionism.

To workers who vote for the openly capitalist parties, we say, break with the class enemy and stand with the working class parties, fighting to make them accountable to the organisations of the working class.

To workers who believe that Labour or Democratic Left can be transformed into a socialist leadership for working class political power, we say: put them to the test of struggle for these demands.

By putting Spring and De Rossa & Co.—and the union leaders—under the hammer of our demands in such struggle, a militant rank and file can reveal to the whole working class in practice that Spring and De Rossa & Co. can never represent their interests.

By not holding back the struggle for a moment for the two-faced political and trade union leaders who claim to speak for us, workers can begin to create organisations of struggle and a new party of revolutionary socialism which can settle accounts finally with capitalism and imperialism in Ireland.

Where We Stand

We fight for the building of such a party, based on the tradition of Lenin and Trotsky and the Bolsheviks. Seventy-five years ago, this month, the struggle created the first worker state which for seven years inspired the working class of the world before the new workers' democracy was choked to death when the Stalinist bureaucrats liquidated the leader of the revolution after western attacks had brought the whole country to death's door.

Just as we have defended that revolutionary legacy against seven decades of Stalinist oppression and lies so we defend it today against the onslaught of the bourgeoisie which falsely seeks to equate revolutionary communism with the stalinist regimes now in their death throes.

The stalinist states are being forced back into an impoverished form of capitalism at a savage cost to hundreds of millions of working people.

Meanwhile capitalism is busy destroying the lives of another generation of the low-paid, unemployed and oppressed throughout the capitalist west. Savage imperialist exploitation by the same capitalists condemn millions more to death by starvation in Somalia and the 'third world'.

Only the struggle to overthrow capitalism in each country can now create hope of freeing humanity from war and oppression.

To begin that struggle in Ireland discuss with the IWG, read our Irish and international publications, struggle alongside us and help to build the Irish section of a new revolutionary communist International. ■

The Campaign So Far

THE MASS ANGER in February at the in-juncting of a raped 14-year old, to stop her travelling for an abortion, posed a major opportunity—and a responsibility—to socialists and feminists.

Until then, all of the feminist or socialist groups had refused to campaign for repeal of the 8th Amendment or of the 1861 Act. The IWG had consistently argued for such a campaign to explicitly decriminalise abortion in Ireland, throughout the nine years since the 1983 referendum. When mass opposition to the anti-abortion laws suddenly welled up in 1992, Irish socialists and feminists could no longer avoid these political questions.

All suddenly admitted the need to challenge the Eighth (anti-abortion) Amendment which had given the state a mandate to intervene in women's private lives 'to vindicate the right to life' of the foetus. But, as events were quickly to reveal, there was no agreement among socialists and feminists to fight now for complete decriminalisation or for positive abortion rights in Ireland.

The Dublin Abortion Information Campaign which had called out the great demonstration, failed to follow up its unexpected success by convening a democratic conference to lay the basis for a campaign. This initiative was left instead to the same feminists who had led the 1983 Anti-Abortion Campaign, but none of whom had been recently active in the Abortion Information campaign.

Activist Groups Needed

The Repeal the Eighth Amendment Campaign was founded at a conference on International Women's Day. The participants did not yet directly represent any sections of the mass of women or workers or youth whose presence on the streets had forced the Government to find a way out through the Supreme Court.

Although there were two delegates at the founding conference from Dublin Council of Trade Unions, there were no active leaders from any rank and file organisations in the working class movement. Nor was any mass women's organisation represented as the only large women's organisations are politically conservative social or cultural ones. To mobilise any real forces in these circumstances called for a determined and united approach to building activist groups in the working class and campuses and in the communities.

There was no involvement by Labour Party organisations, beyond a few activists. Labour's position was little better than that of Fine Gael—to fulminate against the Government's Attorney General for having sought the vicious injunction in the first place and to claim that 'we were right' in 1983 in arguing against the 8th Amendment. Despite its more explicitly secular politics, the Labour parliamentary clique remains deeply compromised by its inclusion of some anti-abortion deputies and local officers who make no secret that they are "Catholics first".

By contrast, the Democratic Left has been able to go much further in the desperate search for a solid base of support to compete with Labour in the next General Election. Over a period of months De Rossa has moved to openly relishing the taunts of Fianna Fáil that he is championing 'abortion on demand'. It is quite easy for him to refute this, however, as his position in no way amounts to providing abortion for any woman who decides she needs it. Nevertheless

his is now the most radical position in the Dáil, calling for abortion provision for cases of rape and incest, where there the woman's health is threatened, and where the foetus is not viable. The Democratic Left nominally affiliated to the Repeal the Eighth Amendment Campaign (REAC) but did not get involved in its action groups.

Unfortunately the REAC leaders refused to address themselves to mobilising any real forces or build action groups towards this end. For them politics was solely about getting media attention. They were happy to have the 'affiliation' of a claimed 42 organisations and yet make no demands whatever on any of these organisations to put any resources into the campaign. They opposed any suggestion that affiliated organisations should be required to help build the action groups of the campaign.

Media Oriented Campaign

The REAC national committee was more and more seen to be using the name of REAC for the purposes of a quite distinct group, a separatist feminist organisation called the Women's Coalition, rather than pursuing the distinct goals of REAC or be accountable to its conference and to its activist membership. In the end it was no more than a media-oriented campaign by and for the Women's Coalition, worthless as a focus for mobilising real forces for abortion rights in Ireland.

The two main left activist groups, each with about 100 activists, rejected all responsibility for leadership in the fledgling campaign. They handed it over to a group of feminists who for years had attempted to build nothing.

The Socialist Workers Movement initially tried to pre-empt the campaign by setting up its own front, the 'Scrap the Amendment' groups but failed because serious activists genuinely wanted a democratic and united campaign of the different forces. They minimised their involvement and took only 1 of the 11 leading positions in REAC, no more than the very much smaller Irish Workers Group and the Workers Solidarity Movement, leaving the feminists in overwhelming control.

SWM voted against committing the campaign to decriminalisation of abortion, not to mention giving it the goal of abortion on demand. When the campaign had not grown much by July SWM pulled out for good from its action groups.

Militant Socialist also built its own front-groups rather than the united campaign action groups which they never attended. This did not deter them from sending enough mem-

bers to the conference on 4th Oct. to control a quarter of the votes. They used this block to vote with the feminists against every single attempt by the Dublin REAC activists to rebuild the campaign on three essential planks.

What the Dublin Activists (and the IWG) had proposed was (a) that all supporting organisations be required to join in building united local action groups; (b) that the campaign fight now, rather than 'ultimately' for repeal of the 8th Amendment; and (c) to adopt as its goal of the unconditional right of women to free and legal abortion and its provision in Ireland.

Militant voted *en bloc* against all three positions. They argued that the strategic goal was to get rid of the 8th Amendment while the concrete struggle now was about information and travel rights. A new national committee was elected comprising a block of five feminists, five Dublin activists and one member of Militant.

Within two weeks the Government's referendum proposals had made a nonsense of the 'strategy' of the feminists and their Militant supporters. The sharpest issue was now a direct attack on positive abortion rights through reinforcing the 8th Amendment and rolling back the Supreme Court concession!

The feminist spokespersons for REAC responded with public statements which did not raise repeal of the 8th amendment at this most crucial moment when it was never more relevant.

Nor did they raise their own call for 'abortion in specific circumstances' which they used to defeat the Dublin activists' call for unconditional abortion rights a week earlier in the Conference. Compared to Democratic Left the position taken by the REAC feminists was cowardly.

Rejection of Criticism

The feminist spokespersons, supported by the Militant member on the national committee rejected criticism of their omission when criticised by IWG. On a vote, they formally refused to be obliged to raise repeal of the 8th amendment in future public statements. They made no secret of their wish to politically liquidate the campaign into the much more conservative and respectable Frontline committee, which had even less forces than REAC but more standing with the media. Frontline, however, was reluctant to risk opening itself up to the activist rank and file of REAC.

With the Women's Coalition, SWM and Militant all refusing to build a united fighting campaign, each concerned with its own stunts and fronts, and with the leadership not fighting for the aims the Campaign had formally adopted, REAC had clearly lost all potential to rally worthwhile united struggle.

The best of the activists in the colleges and the former action groups must now be rallied alongside the Dublin Abortion Information Campaign. Mobilise real opposition to Fianna Fáil's referendum and to maximise the NO vote. Create the broadest possible campaign, rooted in the working class, to fight for abortion rights in Ireland and for all the needs of women to make every child a wanted child born into decent conditions of living. Fight for Repeal of the 8th Amendment, scrap the anti-abortion 1861 Act sections 58 & 59. Open up the struggle for free and legal abortion on demand in Ireland. ■

COUNTER DEMOS

RIGHT FROM the start in REAC IWG vigorously defended the need for counter-demos against pro-life street manifestations—provided that this was clearly subordinated to building the broadest united campaign of all activists.

SWM refused to build the campaign but called counter-demos against the anti-abortion lobby to highlight themselves. They preferred to have 150 demonstrating exclusively under the SWM banner than to build a united campaign which might have brought out 1,500. IWG worked with the campaign to ensure and defend the presence of pro-choice leafletters in Dublin centre in the face of constant attacks by Youth Defence—while SWM and Militant stood aloof. ■

FIVE THOUSAND WOMEN in Ireland are having abortions each year—in Britain. These women are forced into secrecy under stigma of criminality. They are obstructed in every possible way, ensuring that the abortions are at a later stage.

They are forced to travel, at huge extra expense, in ignorance and fear. And then they are effectively denied all real medical after-care while forced to guard their secret under officially sanctioned and whipped-up stigma.

Those who have argued for abortion to be allowed in Irish hospitals in cases of rape, incest or fatal defects or infection in the foetus, or where there is a threat to the life or health of the mother, are attempting to go some way to address the problem.

Yet such a position, as taken up by Democratic Left, is but a small and timid break with the bourgeois Catholic 'consensus' in Ireland. Even

THE CASE FOR Abortion on Demand

if fully implemented it would leave untouched the problems of the vast majority of women who travel from Ireland for abortions.

For the most part their decisions to terminate a pregnancy are for other reasons, not covered by any of the Democratic Left's categories. The only legal framework which can accommodate the full range of reasons why those women choose abortion is one which recognises the *absolute right* of the woman to choose abortion.

Women cannot concede to the State the power to set legal or medical tests for who should or shouldn't be 'allowed' to have an abortion. It must

be the woman's own choice. Any other course means accepting that the State can *compel* a woman to carry through a pregnancy or criminalize her for attempting to end it. In Ireland that will continue to include cases of pregnancy by rape or incest, or where the foetus is not viable, or even where it threatens the health of the mother. The threat of criminalisation is the last thing a woman needs when she is faced with an unwanted or crisis pregnancy.

Not only must the state be compelled to *legally* recognise the right of a woman *unconditionally* to exercise the choice to terminate a pregnancy; it must be compelled to

provide all necessary facilities for the health and welfare of the woman in the exercise of her choice. That means nothing less than *free and legal abortion on demand*. Otherwise working class women, especially unemployed women, will be effectively obstructed from exercising their right to abortion, while those who can afford it have the service easily available to them.

Opposition to the slogan abortion on demand also comes from some feminists: 'abortion on demand is no answer for women' or 'it encourages abortion as a method of birth control'. They cannot bring themselves to vindicate, in their demands on the state, the *majority* of the women who

are having abortions. Most of these are for personal reasons which would not remotely be covered by the cop-out slogan of the Irish feminists for 'abortion in specific circumstances'.

In the last analysis, we must fight always on the *principle* that the State which presides over the general oppression of women can *never* be conceded any right whatever to dictate to women about their own bodies and their own lives.

In a society truly rid of women's oppression, no such state power would exist. Sexual relations would be truly based on free relations between people and children born because they are genuinely wanted in a society which would guarantee their welfare as no class society has ever done.

As socialists have affirmed throughout two centuries of the class struggle against capitalism, *the degree of woman's emancipation is the natural measure of the general emancipation!*■

Answering the Bigots

The unborn child is a human being; therefore its wilful destruction is murder?

As much as a century ago Engels noted that the legal profession "have cudgelled their brains in vain to discover a rational limit beyond which the killing of the child in its mother's womb is murder".

The reality is that for society, for the state, for the law, there is no such definite point before birth on which society can ever agree. The unborn foetus can have no standing as an individual, a person, a citizen before the law, independently of its mother. Even the church does not regard the unborn as a member of the Christian community.

To the mother who welcomes her pregnancy and looks forward to a daughter or son, the foetus may well be already her 'baby', someone definite in her mind. But that potential reality of a future child and citizen cannot be a principle allowing the state to intervene between mother and foetus to assert 'rights' on behalf of the foetus against the will of the mother.

Such interference in the private life of the woman, such an invasion of her bodily integrity by the State, is fundamentally destructive of democratic rights and freedoms.

The moralists contradict their own method of analysis on the question of 'murder' when dealing with abortion. Abortion does kill a form of human life which is potentially a future person. But the moralists themselves argue that not every wilful killing, even of a developed human being, is murder.

The church, in its latest catechism, goes as far as calling not only certain wars legitimate but also the sentencing of people to death. Even with a fully independent human being it depends on the circumstances when a deliberate killing is murder.

For socialists this is no abstract principle either. Obviously the definition of what constitutes a legitimate killing is different. The killing of imperialist soldiers in wars of national liberation is clearly legitimate. It was necessary in Ireland to shake off the direct control of British imperialism.

Why should women not also be permitted to decide that an abortion is a lesser evil in some circumstances? The fundamental difference with abortion, however, is that the foetus which is terminated cannot at all be

regarded by society as comparable to an independent born human being.

As medical science advances premature babies can survive at 24, 20 and even 18 weeks of gestation. Surely there can be no denial that late abortions are the killing of a child?

The majority of abortions take place at an early stage of the pregnancy: 91% are before 12 weeks, more than 99% before 20 weeks.

Late stage abortions are normally a trauma for women, therefore no woman would voluntarily wait for a couple of months and then have an abortion. The percentage of Irish women having late abortions is higher compared to other countries. The lack of easily available information and the lack of facilities in Ireland are the main reasons why.

If abortion is considered at a late stage the principle is the same: the state cannot compel a woman to deliver an unwanted pregnancy. Of course, such an experience would not be wanted by any woman; but a small number of cases do arise, as in late diagnosis of cancer, or severe deformity.

Criminalising late abortions rather than ensuring that they are safely carried out has been no answer in the past. Circumstances have arisen in every society and epoch where women have been driven to get rid of an unwanted pregnancy, risking death by unhygienic abortion, or by infanticide. The experience in Ireland is very revealing in this regard.

In 1929 a presiding judge complained that "the number of newly-born infants in the country who were murdered by their mother at present surpassed belief" (Cork Examiner, cited by Pauline Conroy Jackson in 'The Abortion Papers: Ireland', Attic Press, 1992). Women in Ireland started travelling to Britain for abortions after the reform there in 1937, resulting in a sharp drop in the number of cases coming to court in Ireland.

When they could not travel during the war prosecutions rose sharply for *detected* backstreet abortions in Ireland—25 between 1942 and 1946 (Jackson). Abortion, even occasionally at a late stage, has been a reality even in the most legally repressive conditions. The only difference that criminalisation has made is to increase the human misery of women; or to increase infanticide.



If abortion was legalised women would use it as an alternative to contraception?

Sadly, there are countries where contraception is so bad that women resort to frequent abortions instead. Sadly there are all too many abortions which women should never have had to contemplate. But the reason is not because abortion is too freely available. It is because society, as well as nature, puts women time and again in a situation facing an *unwanted* pregnancy.

It is elementary for serious supporters of a woman's right to choose abortion to fight every bit as militantly for full sex education, contraception provision, the best possible counselling, social and economic supports for mothers and children, — every measure necessary to ensure that women do not have to face crisis pregnancies if at all possible.

Abortion is a dangerous operation with long-term physical and psychological effects?

Abortion performed in a proper surroundings is no more dangerous to the woman than other operations or even pregnancy itself. Government figures record 171 deaths of mothers at childbirth in Ireland since 1971.

The availability of proper abortion facilities in Britain has saved many Irish women from having to resort to backstreet abortions that have killed so many before.

Given the distress of the unwanted pregnancy itself, many women don't suffer psychologically at all from the abortion itself, but feel relieved. The major cause of the trauma is not the abortion, but the lack of information to make an informed choice, putting the blame for unwanted pregnancy on women rather than on the church, the state and society which are the causes for unwanted pregnancies in the first place.

The vindictive and moralistic crusade against abortion in Ireland consciously sets out to make women feel guilty and to cause them 'psychological' distress.

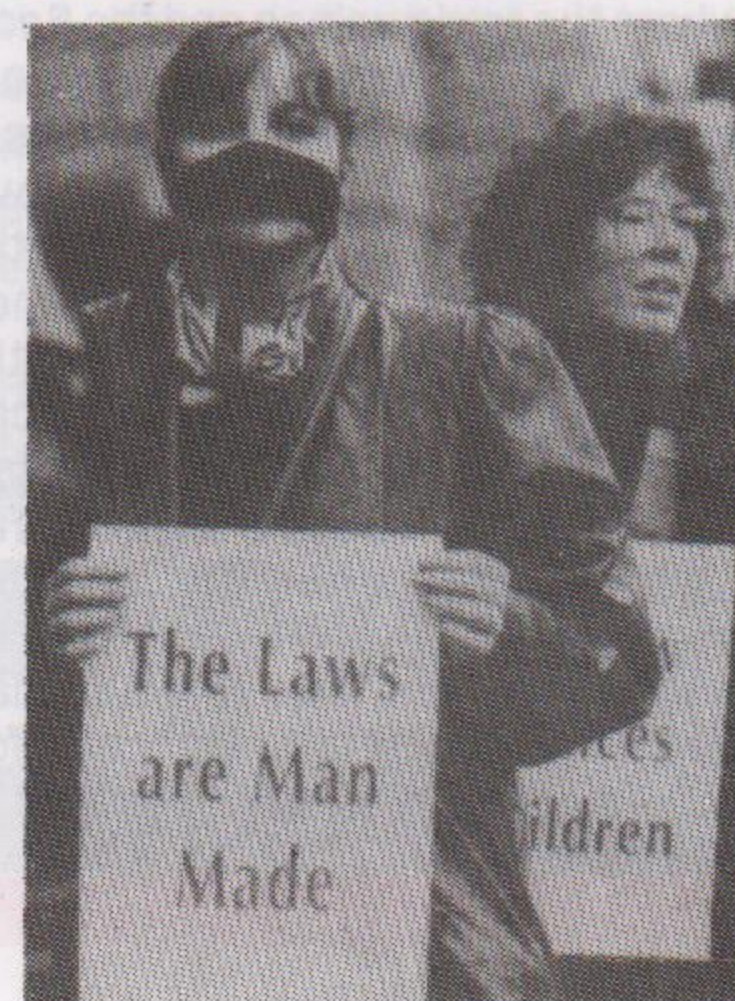
Women who are driven to abortion when they would prefer to have the baby may, of course, suffer distress. Criminalising abortion is no answer at all. The answer must be to address those circumstances which contribute to such a crisis—like unemployment, low wages, poverty, lack of child-care facilities, housing etc.

The so called Pro-Life campaigns put the blame on women, but are unable to address the problem of unwanted pregnancies. Sexuality is part of human life and even the most rigid moral codes could never stop men and women from enjoying it. In defending a woman's right to choose we always put the struggle to make every pregnancy a wanted one to the fore. As long as the living conditions of women are not changed, unwanted pregnancies will occur and therefore the right to choose abortion is a vital part of the struggle for women's liberation.■

Feminist Response

THE 'WOMENS COALITION' is but the latest incarnation of 'radical' feminism in Ireland. On the political issues of abortion it is, however, anything but 'radical', rejecting the open fight for positive abortion rights.

On the methods of struggle it is anything but militant—it even opposed the picketing of the SPUC High Court case in July. On the attempt to mobilise wider forces it is sectarian and self-promoting. It opposed the holding of a mass picket of the Dáil during the debate on the Referendum Bills on 22 Oct. because it would have involved men, only to abysmally fail to deliver on its own promises of a mass women's picket. What mattered was the photo-call for the newspapers, not to mobilise real forces.■



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Class Struggle

FOR A WORKING CLASS WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

FACED WITH a government and Catholic hierarchy determined to roll back the Supreme Court decision, abortion rights will clearly not be won without a mass campaign.

For over 20 years, however, Irish feminists have abjectly failed to mobilise mass forces of any kind, preferring to court alliances with women TDs in Fine Gael, respectable academics and even Protestant clergy and believing that the real struggle is in the media.

Yet the overwhelming mass of women have nothing in common with the middle class liberalism of the 'feminists' of Fine Gael. Middle class and professional women may have a keen interest in winning women's rights to divorce, contraception, abortion etc. But they share little in common with the majority of women whose daily experience is low pay or no job at all, and domestic toil under pressure of endless bills with little or no income, in communities where social services, schools and medical care are a sick joke.

For working class women, and the women of poor rural areas, the state and the government which denies them control over their own bodies is the same state and system which makes unpaid domestic slaves and cheap labour of them. Working class women at home, at work or on the dole, wherever they organise in wage struggles or against cuts, discover in practice that their middle class "sisters" may indeed champion sexual freedoms but can never be relied upon to support their struggle against exploitation.

Middle class women are generally reconciled to the capitalist social order because of their relatively privileged conditions of living. They will not militantly struggle for women's rights in a way that threatens the political order of the ruling class and the church hierarchy. Not so with the women of the working class, if they are mobilised to both resist the attacks of the capitalist state and fight for their rights as women.

This is no pipe dream. Working class women's movements have been built and played a major role in the improvement of social conditions and of women's rights. The greatest was that led by Clara Zetkin in Germany where the trade unions and the Social Democratic Party organisations mobilised hundreds of thousands of women and regularly sold over 100,000 copies of their fighting women's paper. It was a movement which also challenged sexism within the working class, seeking to educate men and involve them in the struggle for women's specific rights. This tradition was taken up later by women in Russia at the instigation of the Bolsheviks, and later internationally by the Communist International before it was corrupted and destroyed by Stalinism.

All of these movements rejected the idea of building a movement of women of 'all classes together'. As Zetkin wrote in 1896, that despite agreeing with the progressive demands of the bourgeois women's movements, "the liberation struggle of the proletarian woman cannot be similar to the struggle that the bourgeois woman wages against the male of her class. On the contrary, it must be a joint struggle with the male of her class against the entire class of capitalists".

The most active feminists of today are much more from the ranks of the professions and academic life than from the families of the big capitalists as in Zetkin's time. Many of them are

Clearly, it is impossible to talk about any campaign for abortion rights without touching on the wider need for sex education and freely available contraception. The demand for abortion rights must be seen to go hand in hand with struggle for fully financed maternity leave, state child supports, free creches and nursery schools, free education, comprehensive health and social services, a living wage, decent housing and jobs for the unemployed. It must be the struggle for a life worth living rather than just for survival, for both the mother and the wanted child.

The so called pro-lifers, instead of tackling the conditions that give rise to unwanted pregnancies in the first

household. Women now earn 40% less than men and are concentrated in low paid jobs, often segregated from men.

Nevertheless, a significant mass of working women, about 200,000 in the Republic, are organised in trade unions. (A similar number are employed in factories, services and businesses where the trade union bureaucrats are too self-interested to attempt to organise them.) It is precisely into these workplaces and trade union organisations that the fight must be taken as a priority to mobilise real forces around the sharpest issues of the day touching on the specific oppression of women.

Winning even small groups of activists among organised women workers can be the basis for a serious campaign that breaks out of the illusory battle for sanitised media sound-bites. Winning them to affiliate to the campaigns, to bring their banners on marches, to raise demands on their union leaderships are the logical next steps, making the trade union women's conferences into forums for mobilising real struggle instead of stage-managed gatherings where the agenda is vetted by male bureaucrats, usually to stop open discussion on issues such as abortion rights.

But there can be no concession whatever to those who whisper that we should concentrate on the economic issues and later hope to create conditions for raising the issues of sexual oppression. Boldly and at all times we must fight to organise women workers to take up with equal force the issues of equal pay and divorce rights, control of fertility and an end to discrimination, abortion rights and the right to work etc.

Three in every five married women have no job, however. But they are no less willing to fight on issues of cuts and services and to make their demands heard on abortion, contraception and divorce rights if given a lead. A much broader movement of working class women is needed, linking workers, housewives, unemployed, students and young women generally. We need a movement in many forms based on all areas where women can be drawn together: workplaces, unions, communities, student groups, unemployed centres.

We need a movement that starts from a working class perspective and seeks to win women activists from other classes to join and support our struggles. A woman's right to work would have to become one of the central slogans. Defend existing jobs, fighting for union standards and the reduction of the working week, without loss of earnings, to make more jobs, while fighting for a programme of useful public works to create full time jobs under Trade Union conditions. A priority among such public works must be to provide socialised care for children, the ill and elderly, decent and cheap housing, support facilities for women in crisis, community amenities, more teachers etc.

The question immediately arises: how to finance such a programme? It raises demands to make the wealthy and the capitalists pay, to stop the mass siphoning of taxes into the pockets of the finance capitalists at

home and abroad, and all such demands constitute a profound challenge to the political power of the bosses and to capitalism itself.

A working class women's movement must be won to break out of the reformist traditions of the labour movement, the belief that fundamental reform is compatible with maintaining capitalism as a system. A central task must be to explain how the oppression of women is systematic under capitalism, how it is maintained for the sake of the capitalist profit system itself and is not something simply left over from an earlier period of history.

Especially in semi-colonial Ireland, where international corporations and banks dominate the economy, the ruling class desperately needs the ideological protection of the deeply conservative Catholic hierarchy. For these services the Irish bourgeoisie will obstruct and gut of any meaning the 'promises' of reform on women's rights, and will bitterly oppose any fundamental challenge to Catholic moral dictates on issues as sensitive as abortion. The 'separation of church and state', thus becomes a central democratic demand for any such working class women's movement in Ireland.

The formation of a mass working class women's movement in Ireland would be a major step forward in the fight against women's oppression. It would also mean a step forward for the whole working class, which is currently weakened by sexist divisions (and many others) fostered by capitalism and upheld by the reformist bureaucrats.

It is crucial that women organise independently in the labour and trade union movement as also within broad campaigns of struggle, in order to put the issues of their special oppression most forcefully and clearly on the agenda. But no campaign for women's liberation can ever be effective if the organised women within it do not fight for open democratic mass involvement of the mass of women and men. In order to win real gains for women from an anti-woman and clericalist establishment a leadership must be developed which is prepared to break radically with even the so-called 'liberals' in the establishment who simply give bourgeois 'feminist' cover to a social order which is oppressive of women to its very core.

Whilst all sorts of women with different political ideas would unite in the movement to fight for specific common actions, revolutionaries would seek to win arguments and action around our own programme and politics—while defending the right of every different working class political trend to fight for its ideas. We openly argue that such a movement, indispensable to win the particular struggles of the day, cannot achieve full liberation for women unless it becomes part of a revolutionary movement against capitalism, led by a party of the most active women and men committed to the overthrow of the bosses' state. We invite activists in the present struggle to debate and discuss this perspective with us, to work with us in practical action, and to join us if you are persuaded to this goal.■



Soviet Women's Emancipation Day Poster, 1920.

personally very combative and militant fighters. They must be won away from their perspective, however, of building an 'all class' alliance of women, of courting respectable support from within the establishment. They must be won to turn to the women workers in general and to identify themselves with the class interests of the mass of women in the fight against women's oppression.

What can be the starting point for such a strategy? The question must be considered in terms of what ideas and demands are to be raised and also among whom and where.

place, put the blame on women for not willing to accept their destiny as domestic slaves at the service of their husband and kids. It is precisely their role in the household and family which is the basis of women's systematic oppression of women under capitalism. This in turn weakens their ability to resist further attacks on their economic conditions. The 1980s saw an increase in women's unemployment of 241%, compared with a rate of 145% for men. Women-out-first-policies fall on fertile ground as long as women's primary responsibility is defined as in the